

□ U.S. Democrats Challenge Bush This Week on Iraq War

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WASHINGTON -Congressional Democrats on Tuesday orchestrated a showdown with President George W. Bush over the Iraq war by scheduling votes this week on withdrawing U.S. combat troops in defiance of a new White House veto threat.

Votes were expected later this week in the full U.S. House of Representatives and in a Senate committee on Bush's request for nearly \$100 billion to fight the Iraq and Afghanistan wars this year.

Democrats are pushing to bring the Iraq war, now in its fifth year, to an end, but are struggling to win support.

The House was scheduled to start debate on Thursday on a war-funding bill that would bring all combat troops out of Iraq by Sept. 1, 2008, at the latest. Until then, the Democrats' bill would prohibit Bush from dispatching new troops unless he can certify they are properly trained, equipped and rested.

Arguing that the U.S. Constitution gives Congress the power to "exercise its best judgment ... in terms of declaring war and ending war," House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer predicted victory, but acknowledged he didn't have the necessary 218 "yes" votes yet.

"Anybody who says this micromanages (the Iraq war) is dead flat wrong," Hoyer, a Maryland Democrat, said in response to Republican criticism.

Late Monday, the White House issued a statement saying Bush would veto such a bill, putting him on a collision course with the new Democratic-controlled Congress.

"These congressional mandates would place freedom and democracy in Iraq at grave risk, embolden our enemies, and undercut the administration's plan to develop the Iraqi Security Forces and the Iraqi economy," the statement said.

In the Senate, Richard Durbin of Illinois, the body's second-ranking Democrat, told Reuters no final decision has been made, but that the Senate war-funding bill would likely include language similar to legislation that failed last week.

The Senate Appropriations Committee is scheduled to draft that measure on Thursday.

The Senate defeated a stand-alone Democratic bill that would have established March 31, 2008, as the goal date for bringing U.S. combat troops out of Iraq. Only 48 of Senate's 100 members voted for it.

SEARCHING FOR VOTES

House and Senate leaders ratcheted up the rhetoric.

Senate Republicans distributed flyers to reporters picturing pigs sitting atop combat soldiers' shoulders to highlight what they see as special-interest funds, known as "pork," attached to the bill to win votes.

Billions of dollars were added to help farmers get new crop aid, veterans to get better medical care and southern states to rebuild after Hurricane Katrina -- needs Democrats say Republicans ignored last year.

Hoyer, meanwhile, had his own handout chronicling House Republicans' votes in the mid-1990s to set specific deadlines for pulling U.S. troops out of Bosnia.

With House Republicans claiming near unity in opposing the war timetable, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and her lieutenants were trying to secure the votes of enough undecided liberal Democrats, who want a faster end to the war, and wavering conservative Democrats who fret about tying Bush's hands.

In recent days, Pelosi's efforts have been boosted by the liberal group MoveOn.org, which said the House bill was an "important step (that) gives the troops, military families and concerned citizens around the country real hope for a change in course."

Notably, Rep. Janice Schakowsky of Illinois, who holds a Democratic leadership position and is a founding member of a group of liberal lawmakers seeking a Dec. 31 deadline on the war, told Reuters she had decided to vote for her party's bill.